

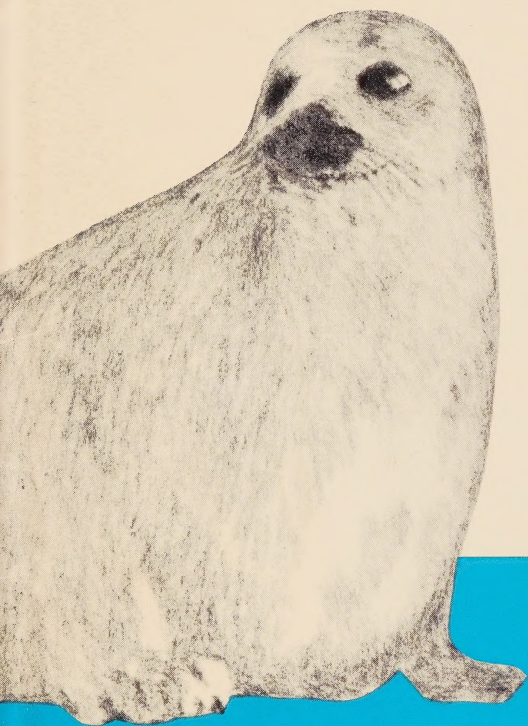
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The Seal Hunt



Questions
and
Answers



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IS THE HARP SEAL AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

No, definitely not. In fact, the harp seal is considered to be the world's second* most abundant species of seal, and by far the largest herds of this species are those which appear each winter off Canada's Atlantic coast. Its population numbers approximately one and a quarter million and is increasing.

HOW DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY SEALS THERE ARE IN THE POPULATION?

Scientists use a variety of methods to assess the size of the seal population. Normal techniques of population assessment for seals, as for other fish and wildlife species, depend upon sampling the catch to determine such factors as mortality rates and maturity and pregnancy rates. One recent technique is through the use of aerial ultraviolet photography. Using this method the white seal pups appear as black spots on a white background, making them easy to count. However, this technique is not foolproof. Based on an incomplete survey conducted in 1975 it was suggested that fewer than 80,000 pups were born at the "Front", i.e. the ice fields northeast of Newfoundland, whereas in actual fact sealers harvested more than 133,000 seal pups in the area that year! In 1977 a more complete survey was conducted and the survey estimate for the main herds at the "Front" was 204,000 - almost exactly the same as estimated by another much less expensive catch and effort analysis. Scientists, including those who conducted the aerial survey, did not recommend that it was necessary to repeat the survey in 1978.

* The most abundant species is the crabeater seal found in the Antarctic.

HOW MANY SEALS WILL BE KILLED IN 1978?

The total permitted kill of harp seals in the entire northwest Atlantic is 180,000 in 1978, approximately six per cent more than in the previous year. About half of these will be taken by large vessels at the "Front", while the remainder are harvested by landsmen and by Canadian and Greenland natives in the north. Scientists have calculated that a catch in excess of 200,000 could be permitted and still maintain the stock at its present level. However, it is the intention of the Canadian Government to allow the stock to continue to grow. Hence, the increase in catch quota has been quite small.

ARE THE SEALS KILLED ONLY TO MAKE FUR COATS OR TRINKETS?

In contrast to the majority of fur-bearing animals harvested in Canada, the United States, the Soviet Union and other major fur producers, the seals taken off eastern Canada are not hunted exclusively for their furs. Meat is taken for human consumption from a large proportion of the seals harvested. Canadian sealers engaged in the large vessel hunt at the "Front" in 1976 gained 45 per cent of their income from carcass meat, flippers and fat. In the 1977 hunt over half of their income related to these items. Edible products as well as the pelts are therefore important in the seal hunt. The pelts of the seals go to make a variety of products, such as fur coats, trim, and boots, and leather products such as handbags and belts. Most of the more valuable sealskin coats on the market are made from pelts taken in the United States' fur seal harvest on the Pribilof Islands and those in the Soviet Union and South Africa.

IS THE CLUBBING OF SEALS CRUEL?

No. There is evidence from thousands of autopsies conducted by veterinary pathologists that the method of clubbing and bleeding out produces a humane death and is, in fact, more humane than that occurring in most animal slaughter operations. By "humane" we mean that an animal is killed with an absolute minimum of physical pain or psychological distress. Many other methods have been studied by scientists who continue to recommend that the current method is the most humane and adaptable to the hunt. The method continues to be employed by Canada, the U.S.A., U.S.S.R. and other countries. There is no doubt that the appearance of the clubbing of seals is visually upsetting, particularly to most of us who have never seen animals slaughtered. It has been verified that muscular movement observed in seals during this process is due to reflex contraction common in animals shortly after death.

Some people have suggested that the taking of the pup causes distress to the mother seal. However, most harp seals have abandoned their pups by the time they are harvested, and those that have not done so generally desert their pups at the approach of the sealers. Veterinary pathologist Dr. H.C. Rowsell has concluded that the dam-pup relationship in seals is hormonal in nature, and ceases rapidly with either the weaning or loss of the pup.

HOW ARE REGULATIONS ON HUMANE KILLING ENFORCED?

All sealers are licensed by the Government of Canada. Each of Canada's large sealing vessels which, collectively take about half of all seals killed, carries a minimum of one fishery officer on board. A fishery officer is empowered to summarily remove any sealer from the ice and to suspend his licence if he has reason to believe that the sealer has violated the regulations on humane killing or any other regulations. Fishery officers also patrol areas where coastal residents take seals. In addition, observers from the humane movement and veterinary pathologists visit the sealing operations to observe killing techniques and to perform autopsies on the seals. Their reports are publicly available and indicate that the harvest of whitecoats is conducted in a humane manner. Lectures and explanatory brochures are given to licensed hunters to explain the sealing regulations, particularly in regard to the proper methods of humane killing.

ARE ONLY SEAL PUPS KILLED?

No. In 1977 approximately 60,000 whitecoat seal pups were harvested out of a total allowable catch of 170,000 seals. Most of the seals taken are, in fact, not whitecoats but slightly older animals which have moulted and changed appearance, or animals which are one year of age or older. The large vessel hunt in offshore areas concentrates primarily on whitecoat seals since these are concentrated and thus easily harvested and have high value both for their fur and for their fat and flippers. In addition, Canada's Seal Protection Regulations stipulate that 95 per cent of the catch by these large vessels must be animals less than one year of age. In terms of conservation, it is preferable to take a young non-breeding animal than an older one. In fact, it is forbidden to kill adult female harp seals during the whitecoat harvest.

WHAT IS THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT'S POLICY ON SEALING?

In March, 1977, the Canadian House of Commons passed a resolution unopposed by *any* Member of Parliament reaffirming the right of Canadians to take seals. The government regards seals as a natural resource to be harvested as are many species of wildlife and fish. Policy regarding sealing is consistent with other aspects of the Canadian government's fisheries policy, that is, the resources are to be harvested in a humane fashion consistent with sound conservation principles and considering the role of the species in the food chain. The ultimate objective is to maximize the social and economic benefits to Canadians who depend upon harvesting Canadian resources, and to the country at large.

WHO HUNTS SEALS?

The majority of active sealers in eastern Canada are located in the northern half of Newfoundland, in southern Labrador, and on the Magdalen Islands of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. There are thousands of such sealers who may earn a few dollars to as much as several thousand dollars from sealing during a time of the year when no other employment is available. A survey conducted in 1976 indicated that the majority of the sealers were between 25 and 44 years of age and had lived an average of 34 years in their present community. Over 80 per cent were married and earned an annual gross income of approximately \$7,500 to support an average of 3.5 dependents.

WHAT IS THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF THE SEAL HUNT?

A survey conducted by the Canadian Department of Fisheries indicated that the primary and secondary sectors of the seal hunt contributed \$5.5 million to the Atlantic regional economy in 1976. Land based sealers earned an average of \$230, those on small boats earned an average of \$1,250 and those on large vessels an average of \$2,400. The total income to sealers including income from pelts and meat, was approximately \$3 million, while the processing sector added a further \$2.5 million.

IS THERE NO ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT FOR THE SEALERS?

Sealing is only one part of a seasonal round of activities all based upon harvesting renewable resources, which permits the rural people of such areas as northeastern Newfoundland to continue their resource-based economy and culture. It has been suggested by some people unfamiliar with the sealing industry that alternate employment might be found in a "fake fur" factory. However, a seasonal occupation for several thousands of people in rural areas cannot be replaced by full-time employment for a few hundred people in a factory, even if sealers were interested in such a prospect.

Unemployment on the northeast coast of Newfoundland in the first quarter of 1976 was over 17 per cent, and unemployment rates in many sealing villages reached far higher in late winter and early spring.

WHAT IS THE COMMITTEE ON SEALS AND SEALING, WHO ARE ITS MEMBERS, AND WHAT IS ITS MANDATE?

In 1971, the Government of Canada appointed an independent Committee on Seals and Sealing (COSS) which includes scientists, veterinarians and executive members of Canadian and international humane societies. This Committee has a mandate to examine the economic, sociological, ecological and humanitarian aspects of the seal hunt and to recommend any actions, including changes in regulations, which may be considered necessary.

Members of the Committee are: Chairman, Professor Keith Ronald, Dean of the College of Biological Sciences, University of Guelph; Thomas I. Hughes, Executive Vice-President, International Society for the Protection of Animals, London, England; Dr. H.C. Rowsell, Executive Director, Canadian Council on Animal Care and Professor in the Department of Pathology, University of Ottawa; Kjell Henriksen, a fishing industry executive and former Canadian ICNAF Commissioner and, Professor H.D. Fisher, Department of Zoology, University of British Columbia. The address of the Committee is:

Committee on Seals and Sealing
8064 Yonge Street
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Additional information on the seal hunt is available from:

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